

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 830

CS 211 590

AUTHOR Etchison, Craig
TITLE Literature without Lectures: An Approach That Works.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; Group Discussion; *Group Instruction; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; Journal Writing; *Literature Appreciation; *Peer Teaching; Reader Text Relationship; *Student Participation; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Reader Response Criticism

ABSTRACT

To create an introductory literature course which helps students develop positive feelings about reading and confidence in their abilities to create viable meanings out of a text, an alternative to the standard lecture format or "Socratic" class discussion is needed. Formed from a variety of research, theory, and classroom experience, one alternative pedagogical design relies heavily on peer group work, integrates copious amounts of writing, focuses attention on the text, and is highly accepting of a variety of interpretations and responses to text. Each day, students bring to class a writing assignment focusing on the text to be discussed in class. In the assignment, students briefly summarize the literal meaning of the text, examine what the text may be implying, and make a personal response to the text based on their own experience and background. In class, the students are divided into four peer groups, and each group is given a different question to answer about the day's reading assignment. After 30 minutes working out their responses, a member from each group presents the group's response to the class. Grading is kept to a minimum, with a heavy emphasis on class participation. This student-centered approach engages students intellectually, develops a sense of community in the class, and encourages students to become thoughtful, independent readers.
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Literature Without Lectures:
An Approach that Works

Craig Etchison
Glenville State College
Glenville, WV 26351

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Literature without Lectures:

An Approach that Works

Recently, a sophomore in an introduction to literature class said to me, "I've never read a whole book in my entire life." This statement crystalizes an essential problem I face in introductory literature classes, a required course for all students at my school. Most of my students have done little reading prior to entering college.

Furthermore, many have an intense dislike of reading, and a majority are quick to say they would rather be watching cartoons or soaps than sitting in a literature class. As I see it, my goal in these introductory literature classes is to create a course that not only overcomes these negative (often hostile) attitudes, but also helps students exit the class with some positive feelings about reading and some confidence in their own abilities to create viable meanings out of a text. I admit it, I'm out to turn my students on to the joy of reading and, along the way, to help them become independent readers. And I think I've hit on a pedagogical method that accomplishes both of these goals.

First, let me give a little background. When I first started teaching introduction to literature, I emulated instructors I had in undergraduate and graduate school, using the lecture as my primary vehicle of teaching, offering marvelous bits of

information about authors and works, and occasionally asking a question of the class--to which I already had the right answer (you know, the "guess what the teacher is thinking" exercise). Students would madly scribble my insights into their notebooks--at least the committed grade grubbers would--and I would get my lectures regurgitated on quizzes and exams--with varying degrees of accuracy. But I had to admit (when I was absolutely honest with myself) that even at my best as a lecturer, when I was wired, when the performance was exciting and flawless, there were still students with glazed eyes (or closed eyes--I'm not sure which is worse) betraying minds playing in distant fields, or recovering from the previous night's party. And as I peeked in doors at colleagues teaching literature classes, I saw the same lecture format predominating. I also noticed many bored, passive students. And I couldn't help asking if there weren't a better way to teach a general introduction to literature.

Increasing class discussion seemed to be one way to boost active participation. But when I attempted to make discussions the central component of the class, usually through a Socratic method, conversation always hinged on a few select students--students who were thinking about majoring in English, or that rare breed of student who was interested in

learning for learning's sake. These few students tended to dominate class discussions, while the majority of the class sat in passive silence, seemingly unconcerned, and certainly uninvolved.

In both the lecture format and the Socratic approach, it was obvious that the majority of students saw themselves as empty bowls to be filled up, after which they would pour their learning back to me on an exam. I, as the instructor, remained at the center of the classroom, and learning remained, in essence, a passive activity for most of the students for most of the time. I was, in effect, propagating the type of passive education recent Carnegie reports have decried. This bothered me.

And so I went to work creating an alternative approach to my introductory literature class. To begin with, I used research and theory in teaching composition that suggests the efficacy of both the decentralized classroom and the use of peer group work. I noted the considerable evidence that a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere, particularly in any type of language class, contributes greatly to improved learning. I also took into account the research showing the value of writing for learning. Two small texts further influenced me as I redesigned the course: David Bleich's Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism (NCTE, 1975) and Barrett

Mandel's Literature and the English Department (NCTE, 1970). Out of this variety of research and theory, and my own classroom experience, came a pedagogical design that relies heavily on peer group work, integrates copious amounts of writing, focuses attention on the text, and is highly accepting of a variety of interpretations and responses to text.

Let me explain the nuts and bolts in more detail, using a recent class of 36 students as the paradigm. In our first class meeting, I inform the class that approximately 75% of their grade will come from writing assignments they do prior to each class. These writing assignments have three parts. First, students must briefly summarize the literal meaning of the text we are reading. This literal summary can be quite revealing, illuminating problems that might otherwise go undetected. For instance, I had one student write that Walter Mitty, in the Thurber short story, had a girl friend named Puppy Biscuit. Obviously, the student was having serious problems at the literal level of reading. Second, students look at what the text may be implying--what's below the purely literal level--and we develop some basic critical tools in class for doing this. Third, students make a personal response to the text based on their own experiences and background. This is also the place where students write down any questions the

reading raises. In this way, most students (there are always some exceptions, of course) come to class having actively engaged the text prior to class.

I then break the class into 4 peer groups. Students normally move right into their groups at the beginning of class, and I give each group a different question to answer about the day's reading assignment. Because the students have already written about the assignment at some length before class, they have a solid starting point for developing an answer to the question.

The questions I pose are quite important for the success of the group work. I try to give each group a question for which there is no obviously simple answer. The questions focus on ambiguities in the text, or require students to do some inferring, or push students to look at a text from an unusual point of view. The groups have thirty minutes to work out their response. A different member of the group serves as recording secretary for each class meeting and presents the groups' response to the class.

Let me give a specific example of how this worked in a recent class. The text was Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." I asked one group to consider whether Mrs. Macomber deliberately murdered Francis. The group split on this question, half saying she did and half saying she didn't, and the argument waxed heavy. The

exciting thing for me was to watch as every member of the group participated, continually referring to the text to support their positions. A couple of the students even took pieces of paper to represent characters and placed them in positions on a desk based on their reading of the critical scene in the text, to see if they could gain any insights. In the end, the group could not agree and gave two responses. The entire class then thrashed over the question.

The beauty of this pedagogy--at least to my mind--is that four groups are actively involved in creating meaning from a text. In the time the groups have to work on their questions, the room is alive with conversation, the hum peaking as positions or insights are proposed, subsiding as students chew and digest possibilities, rising again as further questions are posed and new possibilities generated out of the discussion. And there is the constant rustle of pages as students pore over the text, reviewing, rereading, rethinking.

I do not actively participate in any group. As soon as I try to sit with a group, discussion lapses, and all eyes are glued on me, the professor, who, after all, "must" know the answer. So I sit quietly to one side of the room, listening and observing, occasionally offering background information if a

group asks for it. As groups work, I am able to observe what is happening, to hear what students are saying, to watch critical thinking going on. For example, at one point, toward the end of one discussion, Alice said to Stan, "Well, that shoots everything I wrote about today's assignment." She had completely rethought the text during the group work. In another group, Debbie, in response to an assertion, said, "Yeah, but look what it says on page 331," and the whole group turned to the passage and read over the words Debbie referred to. When John made some particularly insightful comments about the meaning of the watch and compass in Faulkner's "The Bear," Jennifer said, "That's good. I never thought about it that way while I was reading." These are just a few examples of the conversations I hear every class--even from those students who would never think of volunteering information in front of a whole class. I see the group work as the the kind of active engagement of a text that I want in a literature class. I also notice that, with only a few exceptions, even the shyest, most reserved student eventually participates in group discussions.

I also find that student willingness to exchange ideas carries over when the whole class gets together for discussion, leading to some wonderfully dynamic exchanges. Early in the semester, Robert asserted that the Duchess in Browning's "My Last Duchess" was

a floosie. This statement brought assent from John and a storm of protest from Debbie and Connie. In the course of coming to some consensus, the class referred to the text continually, and I could see the class begin developing a sense of how important it is to read and reread in order to understand a text, especially poetry. Understanding the necessity of close reading, acquired in the context of a real discussion, carried over to discussions the rest of the semester and was, I think, far more effective than any lecture I could have given on the subject.

As you have probably gathered by now, this is a student centered classroom. When the class gathers after the peer group discussions to talk over the questions I have posed, I encourage students to talk to each other--not to me as examiner. We always gather in a circle, no matter how large the class, so that we talk to each other--not to backs of heads. And I find it exciting when students get so caught up in exchanging their ideas about a text that they forget about me--that they engage each other in an intellectual transaction based on their reading and interpretation of a text.

I remain far more in the background than is normally the case in most literature classes, while the students are out front, actively engaged in creating meaning. I serve as a resource person, and

I will toss a question into the ring if I think it appropriate. I try not to dominate, though there are times when I have to bite my tongue so that I don't jump into a discussion and give my (the right?) interpretation.

Furthermore, as the class begins to sense its community--to see itself working together in a supportive atmosphere--humor enters the picture. And it's good, healthy humor. (I've never had a case where people were laughing AT someone; rather, we laugh with each other.) This humor often makes a point, or reinforces some facet of the discussion that might otherwise be glossed over. In a discussion of Marvel's imagery in "To His Coy Mistress," I had mentioned his use of figurative language in the line, "My vegetable love should grow/ Vaster than empires, and more slow." Andy, the class jock, who proved to be a most perceptive reader as well as a quick witted humorist, said, "cucumber." We had mentioned Freudian interpretations a few days earlier, and the class broke up in laughter. I suspect that many in the class will not forget those lines, or that poem--and may never forget the sense of what an image is.

When I began using the pedagogical approach I have outlined above, I wondered if those important ideas and insights I had about various works (or had read in critical studies) would ever become part of

the discussion if I didn't/ dominate the class, didn't enlighten my students in guru fashion. I should have worried less. Students, given the right learning atmosphere, surprise with their insights. Of course, not everything I might think important is mentioned, but then, what is ignored probably is not important in the lives of my 19 year old students. A balance is struck. Some of my pet ideas are not discussed, but I'm willing to trade that for a lively class discussion where people are actively exploring a text and creating meaning in the context of their own lives--students becoming independent readers.

I keep grading to a minimum. I want students to enjoy the course as much as possible, and giving many tests and quizzes seems to get in the way of what I see as the purpose of an introductory literature class--enticing students from a variety of disciplines to see that reading can be an enjoyable, illuminating, worthwhile endeavor. I grade the journals twice--and allow the students to select the entries they want me to grade. (Why should I penalize someone for an effort at interpretation that went awry?) I also give a major grade for class participation. If a student is hung up on having test grades (and I have had some who are) I offer an optional mid-term and final exam.

During the course of the semester, I do no

lecturing beyond brief introductions to the genres. If I think some background information to a piece of literature will enhance students' access to it, I will present the information.

How do students respond? Quite positively. Many of them put substantial effort into their written responses, and that effort pays dividends as students become more critical--using insights gained in class discussions to inform later written work. Peer group discussions and class discussions never lag. There is almost always a palpable level of energy in the classroom. And it is rare to see glazed eyes or nodding heads. There is little passivity, but lots of activity.

The positive results of this pedagogy come, in great part, from the written work before class and the group discussions in class. But I also think part of the reason for the energy of classes--for the amount of active discussion--is my willingness to accept alternative views when looking at a text. Almost all of my students begin the class thinking there is only one "right" way to read a text--especially in an "English" Class. But my willingness to accept a variety of interpretations helps students begin to see that a text may be read more than one way--that a text may have a variety of facets--a fact I was never sure students understood when I served primarily as a lecturer-examiner. As one of my

sharper students pointed out to the class when we read Poe's "Cask of Amontillado," when he looked in the library, he found twenty-six different interpretations of the story. Who is to say one is the "right" interpretation.

I have found this approach to teaching introductory literature classes exciting and rewarding, and most of my students think so too. I go into my classes with anticipation, wondering what insights my students will bring, knowing that I will leave the class with a slightly new perspective on some part of the text we are reading. Best of all, by the end of the semester, I am able to see quite a few of my students exit the class as thoughtful, independent readers.